Food sharing among the Pygmies of Central Africa

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FOOD SHARING AMONG THE PYGMIES OF CENTRAL AFRICA

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ABSTRACT This paper describes the sharing and circulation of food among the Aka Pygmies from Central African Republic (northwest Congo Basin), compared with other groups, Baka and Gyeli from Cameroon, and Mbuti from eastern Zaïre. All four groups practice sharing in three phases: (1) dividing up meat among hunters, (2) sharing of each hunter's part among his kin, (3) distributing cooked food by every household. Sharing is made, without any centralization, by ascribing the ownership of the animal, i.e., the responsibility of its sharing, to the owner of the weapon that killed it.

Sharing among African Pygmies is a way of pooling risk, which satisfies two complementary functions: a supplying function (corresponding to food supply uncertainty), and a social function (corresponding to group cooperation and cohesion).

However, in the Pygmy's concept, food sharing cannot be isolated from other types of exchange; it is only one part of a larger system including the circulation of goods (mainly iron tools) and the acquisition of spouses. Food sharing is a function in the wider system of exchange and cooperation that perpetuates the society.

Key Words: Pygmy hunter-gatherers; Food sharing; Risk; Supplying function: Social function.

INTRODUCTION

Food sharing is a crucial step in providing members of a social group with their physiological means of subsistence. As obtaining food is the ultimate result of human efforts, food sharing is at the interface of a group's technical environment and their social organisation. However, it may come as a surprise to find that food has to be shared more in the rain forest which is usually considered to be a very rich environment, than on the dangerous ice packs of Eskimo or in the inhospitable desert of the Australian Aborigines. Close examination of both real richness of the rain forest and food distribution practices can elucidate various functions and mechanisms of sharing. Such an analysis may also show to what extent ecological variables influence or justify food distribution, as well as indicating the kind of rules that govern it.

Food sharing raises a wide range of questions involving nutritional, ecological and social factors. From the nutritional point of view, it can be asked what are the consequences of sharing or its absence. In the ecological domain, connections between sharing, uncertainty of food supply and availability of resources have to be established. The social aspects of sharing have been more fully dealt with (Polanyi et al., 1957; Dowling, 1968; Sahlins, 1972; Price, 1975). Sharing is of course, closely connected with social structure, but the extent to which actors are free to choose the way

of sharing is worth investigating. The notion of egalitarianism in relation to food sharing must be also considered.

Sharing can be seen as a means of gaining access to food resources, but it implies some degree of possession of what is to be shared, it can be recognized as a means of appropriating nature (Godelier. 1978). Whether or not individuals cooperate during food-getting activities may influence sharing, and the degree of dependence on sharing should be investigated (Woodburn, 1982).

Among hunting and gathering societies, sharing in general and sharing food in particular have been considered with great care by scholars. In the eighteenth century, philosophers believed that ownership came to existence when man invented agriculture. It was thought that people without agriculture had few needs and great freedom, making sharing unnecessary. Property is a prerequisite of sharing. Concurrently, equality was attributed to pre-agricultural humanity, but it was considered compulsory rather than optional (cf. Condorcet, Montesquieu, Rousseau).

This old idea gave rise in early anthropology to the notion of primitive communism. However, the first field observations made among real hunter-gatherers (Australian Aborigines and Canadian Indians) destroyed this notion and established the existence of property without agriculture (cf. Lowie, 1936).

Modern anthropologists see sharing as the pivot of hunting and gathering societies. However, theories in this domain have evolved noticeably. It used to be thought that food sharing or exchange was "absolutely necessary" (Service, 1966: 14) because of meager or unreliable natural resources, even when the social importance of these exchanges was emphasized. After the revolution stimulated by the concept of the "original affluent society" (Sahlins. 1972), explanations of sharing lost some of their negative aspects and brought out more social functions. The hunting and gathering way of life is now said to be "a sharing way of life" (cf. Lee & DeVore, 1968; Lee, 1980, 1982). According to Leacock & Lee (1982), sharing is the central element in the structure of foraging economy and "total sharing" is a "core feature that characterizes relations of production among foragers" (1982: 8). Woodburn (1982: 442) also defines sharing as "a socially imposed levelling mechanism" seeing it as the foundation of egalitarian societies. More precisely Testard (1982b) maintains that only nomadic foragers are egalitarian. For Ingold (1983), sharing as practised by hunter-gatherers is a system of social relations of production marked by generalized access to resources. which determines "the collective appropriation of nature" (1983: 555).

Meillassoux (1975) sees sharing as a finality, the conclusion of a collective but limited enterprise, which puts an end to any obligations one has contracted toward others. On the contrary, Wiessner (1977, 1982) analyzing Kalahari Bushmen society emphasizes to what extent sharing constitutes "a complex affair involving kinship, symbolic exchange. past interactions and behavior and present need" (1977: 2), and demonstrates that food sharing is a part of a coherent system of risk sharing.

In this paper, I start by describing food sharing and circulation among the Aka Pygmies,[1] a Central-African hunting and gathering society, found in the rain forest of the northwest Congo Basin. This description will cover the different levels at

which sharing is practised in this society, and entails defining ownership of foodstuffs. In the second part, I briefly compare my data with what is known about other Pygmy groups in Central Africa, before going on to discuss why sharing exists in a rich environment.

FOOD SHARING AMONG THE AKA PYGMIES

The Aka Pygmies inhabit the forest located in the south of the Central African Republic and the north of the Congo occupying an area stretching east to west between the Oubangui and the Sangha Rivers and north to the Lobaye. Most of them are still hunter-gatherers, leading a semi-nomadic life but maintaining frequent and regular contacts with the agriculturalists settled in the same forest, with whom they exchange meat for iron and tools. The Aka do not forge iron or make pottery. Although they do not practise agriculture for themselves, they sometimes work for the villagers who do clearing and burning fields before cassava and bananas are planted. They therefore often eat cultivated vegetables as stable foods (Bahuchet, 1972; Bahuchet & Guillaume, 1982).

Throughout this whole geographic area, the Pygmies speak the same language, Aka, which belongs to the Bantu family (C 10 according to the Guthrie classification) but is not spoken by any of the village ethnic groups (Cloarec-Heiss & Thomas, 1978).[2]

I. Social Structure

The camp provides the social framework for Aka economic life and contains about 30 people, that is, six to eight households. Most camp members are related through kinship ties and constitute an extended family with more or less patrilineal core, i.e. a man with his married son or daughter, siblings and paternal cousins. Some men, however, may be linked to the group's core through their wives, and certain residents may be only distantly related to it. Group composition is constantly fluctuating (Bahuchet, 1979), even though the core is fairly stable and always discernible. Some members may leave to visit relatives or, on the contrary, visitors, often the same ones, may come and live several days or weeks in the camp. This means that many Aka spend time in several different camps, although they consider themselves "members" of the camp where they live most of the time and "visitors" in the others. The closer groups are geographically, the more frequent visiting becomes.

The camp is a community, a fact reflected in its spatial pattern: six to eight huts placed in a circle, delimiting a central area which, except when it rains, provides the stage for daily activities. Setting up huts around several distinct central areas is a sign of community sub-groups. Likewise, when two or three camps come together for hunts, each retains its own central area and together they form a chain, linked by paths.

Table 1. Camp composition in the Kenga area.

Age category		Camp 1 Goti	Camp 2 Yembu	Camp 3 Kolaki	Camp 4 Koze	Total	%
Children (0–12 years)		9	10	8	11	38	36
Unmarried adolescents	M	1	3	1	0	5	5
(12–20)	F	4	0	2	2	8	7
	T	5	3	3	2	13	12
Adults	M	4	5	5	6	20	19
(20–50)	F	6	6	5	8	25	24
	T	10	11	10	14	45	43
Elders	M	0	1	1	0	2	2
(50–)	F	2	3	1	1	7	7
	T	2	4	2	1	9	9
Total		26	28	23	28	105	100

M: Male, F: Female, T: Total.

In the region studied, the population can be broken down into four age groups. For 100 Aka, there are 43 adults (19 men and 24 women), 12 unmarried adolescents between twelve to twenty years old, 9 people over fifty years old and 36 children under the age of twelve.

II. Economic Structure

Food-getting activities are usually collective. Only cross-bow hunting for birds and monkeys is done individually. All other types of hunting (net, spear, framework-net) are collective activities requiring the participation of two to forty people, including women as well as men. For example, a couple may hunt porcupines with framework-nets and takes part in net hunts. Foraging for seeds and nuts, yams, mushrooms, insects and honey can be done alone but usually several people, either women (for plants or insects) or men (for honey) or one or more couples (for seeds or caterpillars), work together (Bahuchet, 1985).

In an Aka group, each able-bodied adult contributes to the subsistence effort on a voluntary basis without being given orders by a leader. Searching for food is by far the most time-consuming occupation and requires several hours a day, compared with less than one hour for domestic tasks. Time devoted to food-getting varies seasonally and according to age and sex. Three examples are given in Table 2.

Children under 10 do not work. Old people, much less productive than adults, spend most of their time looking after children or winding ropes and making nets,

Table 2. Time devoted to food-getting (average number of hours per day).

	Type of activity							
	Dry season net hunting		Wet season minor hunting		Wet season caterpillars		Yearly average	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Adolescents	5	6	4	3.5	1	2	3	4
Adults	8.5	4	7.5	4	2	3.5	6	4
Elders	5	5	6	1	3	1	4	2

M: Male, F: Female.

from tow they have found. Fifty to sixty-four percent of a camp's residents are actually involved in food-getting. Adult men account for about 40% of the total time devoted to these activities, while women and adolescents are responsible for 30% and 18% respectively. The remaining 12% is accomplished by old people.

Food-getting activities require only a limited number of tools, and each couple generally has its own: a woven basket, wide-bladed knives, a spear, an ax and a digging stick. Not all couples, however, own nets. The metal used in certain tools is furnished by village smiths.

A last important point concerning Aka economy: about 50% by weight of their diet is composed of starchy food cultivated in the neighbouring villagers' fields. This starch component seems to be a fairly recent addition, going back less than a century, and counterbalances the meat sent by Pygmies to the villages, which during our observation periods, represented more than half the meat produced.

III. Sharing

Sharing operates on three successive levels (Fig. 1): (1) within the task group, (2) within the family group, along kinship lines, (3) within the consumer group, according to camp residency. Economic organization is more important at the first and third levels, while the second is mostly concerned with social structure.

Sharing within the task group involves only meat from game captured during collective hunts. Plants or invertebrates obtained by foraging are only shared at the third level and optionally at the second. This also applies to honey which is gathered as a cooperative venture. Although it may be followed by a collective meal at the foot of the tree, the person who found the hive does not divide its contents up among the gatherers. Within the consumer group, however, honey is systematically distributed. In the case of other foraging activities, part of the harvest is sometimes eaten on the spot, e.g. certain fruits, nuts that have been shelled beneath the tree. This also applies to porcupine skins which may be roasted and eaten right after the hunt (with frame-work-nets). But most foodstuffs are taken back to the camp and cooked before being eaten.

1. Sharing within the Production Task Group

When an animal has been taken, it is butchered and distributed among the hunters according to the functions they performed during the hunt. The type of animal and the techniques used to kill it determine the way the meat is cut up and the number of parts obtained. This type of sharing is obligatory and follows strict rules. The term *mo.bando* "one's due" refers to the part attributed to a hunter. After a hunt, all the game caught is not centralized. Each animal is butchered and shared out by its "acquirer" *konza* or his designated representative (wife, child). The "acquirer" or owner of the meat, at first glance, would appear to be the hunter who struck the first blow even if it was not the fatal one. Actually, however, ownership is ascribed to the owner of the weapon that immobilized the animal.

In the case of spear hunting, the way the carcass is divided and the subsequent

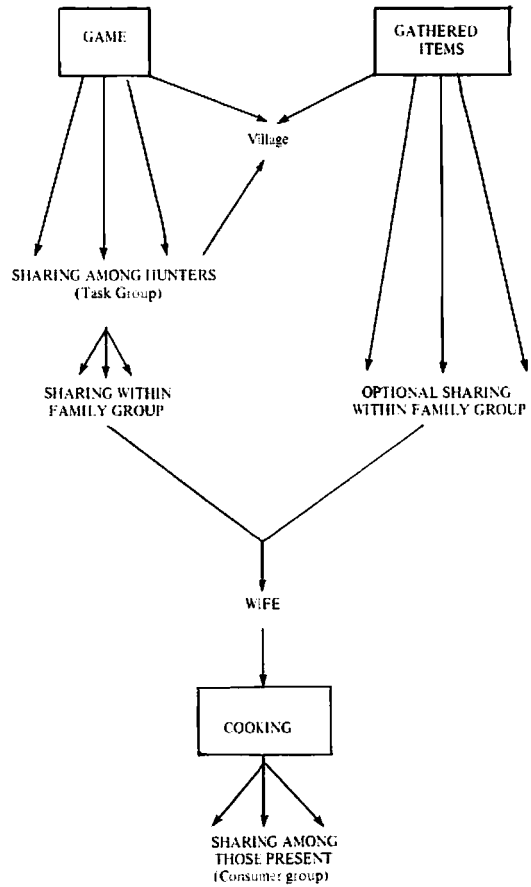

Fig. 1. Diagram of food circulation.

parts attributed vary according to the animal (for a detailed description of butchering, see Bahuchet, 1985). The head always goes to the hunter whose spear struck first and who is therefore the "acquirer". The other portions are not necessarily alloted by name. They go to the one who struck second, to those who encircled the animal and sometimes to those who helped carry the meat. All the parts not assigned to a hunter are explicitly destined to the camp as a whole. The bigger the animal, the fewer the portions that go to the hunting party (cf. Table 3).

In the case of net hunting, the entire animal is ascribed to the owner of the net, who must set aside two parts, one for each of the first two hunters who seized the prey in the net. This rule explains why a wife will wait by her husband's net, for if she is the first or only person to get hold of the animal, it belongs entirely to the couple. Owning a net is obviously very important and villagers are eager to lend

Table 3. How game is attributed.

Animal	Male weight (kg)	Number of parts	Total number of parts attributed	Parts attributed to acquirer
SPEAR HUNTING				
Giant Pangolin	30	10	8	4
Yellow-backed Duiker	50	12	12	8
Chimpanzee	50	27	9	3
Red Hog	60	16	4	1
Situtunga	80	12	12	8
Bongo	175	18	1	1
Gorilla	175	32	1	1
Elephant	3,500	uncountable	about 5	about 4
NET HUNTING				
Blue Duiker	5	3	3	2
Medium-size Duikers	25	7	7	5
Red Hog	60	16	16	8

theirs so as to obtain half of each antelope caught. The other half goes to the borrower. This type of sharing is not really collective and at the end of the day, there are often hunters who return to camp empty-handed.

The way of sharing game killed during the spear hunting, differs basically from that of the game caught in nets. In the first case, the "acquirer" is entitled to only a limited number of parts, with most of the meat going to the community as a whole. In the second case, the "acquirer" receives the whole animal (except for two parts) (Figs. 2-1, 2-2). One system of sharing appears therefore more "equal" or at least more general than the other. This observation along with others can be used to argue for the borrowing of net-hunting by the Aka (Fig. 3) (Bahuchet, 1987).

It is important to reemphasize that the animal is ascribed not to the man but to the weapon (spear or net) that immobilized it. As a matter of fact, when an object has been lent, its absent owner is the "acquirer" and, as such, is in charge of sharing. The wielder of the borrowed weapon is entitled to half the part alloted to the owner. The "acquirer" of the animal does not eat any of the meat, for if he did so, he would incur supernatural punishment.

2. Sharing within the Family Group

Each hunter who has participated in a catch and received a portion of meat must obey rules of sharing based on kinship and divide up his raw meat among certain of his relatives who are in camp at that time. This is the same way game captured during individual hunts (traps, crossbow) is divided. The hunter must share his meat with: *moeto*, "wife", his real wife and his classificatory potential spouses (elder brother's wife, wife's younger sister); *tae*, *"father," his father and his mother's elder sister's husband; ngoe*, "mother," his mother and mother's sisters, and *koko*, "grand parents", maternal and paternal grand parents, father's father's brothers and sisters, mother's elder brother and this man's oldest son.

Sharing on this level concerns mainly "elders." A young man must give to his

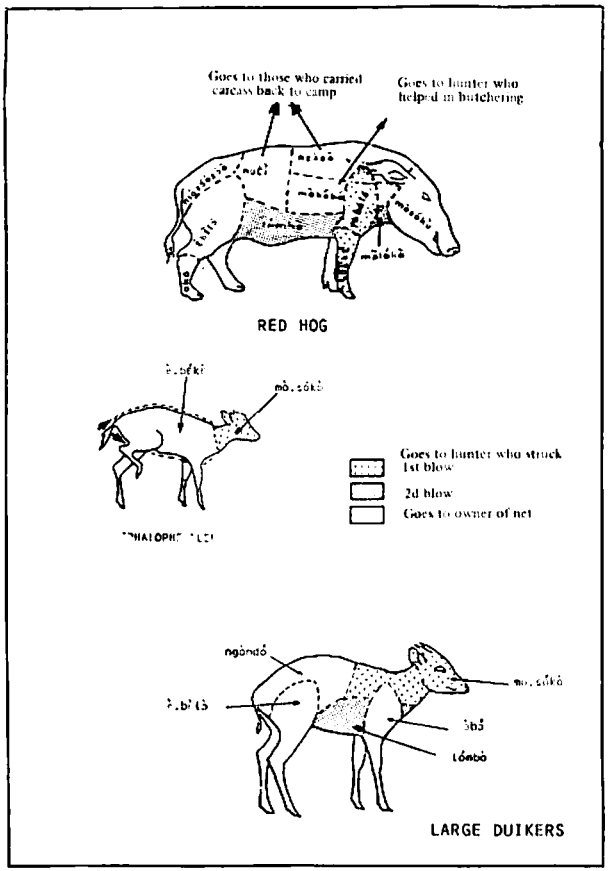

Fig. 2-1. Parts of game in net hunting.

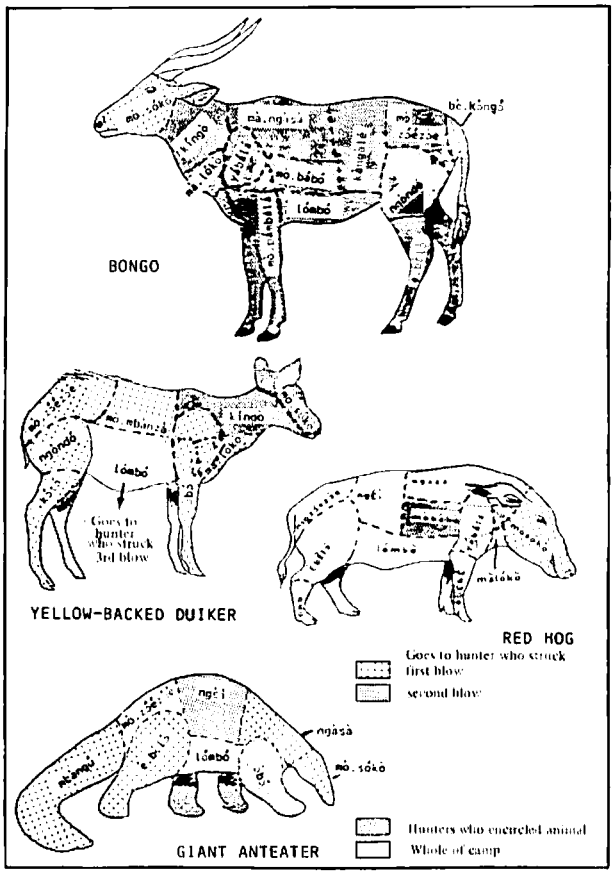

Fig. 2-2. Parts of game in spear hunting.

older relatives but they do not owe him anything once he is married. Nothing is owed to siblings (Fig. 4). Very small animals (birds, rodents, mongooses, etc.) are not divided up this way but may be given whole.

3. Sharing within the Consumer Group

All the food that has been distributed finally reaches the women, who are in charge of cooking it. At this point, certain items can be set aside and prepared for storing. Medium-term food-preserving techniques (various methods of smoking) are mainly used for the food (e.g. smoked meat) destined to be exchanged with non-Pygmy neighbours and occasionally for the products (e.g. caterpillars, seeds) intended for domestic consumption (Bahuchet & Thomas, 1985). Most food, however, is prepared and consumed immediately. Each woman boils all she has gathered or received in a single pot, making a kind of stew which may be with or without meat. This preparation constitutes the usual one-course meal. Whenever there is enough, the cook serves out her stew into enamel plates, one for each household in the camp (including visitors, whether or not they are Pygmies).

This daily circulation of plates is quite obvious. Sixty percent of the dishes prepared in a camp each day are distributed among residents in this way. Even if a

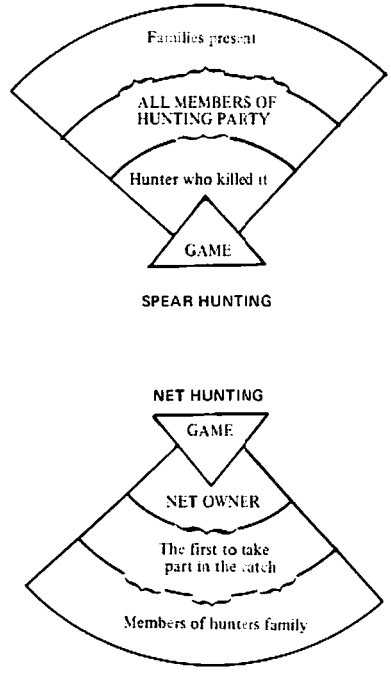

Fig. 3. Sharing patterns in spear hunting and net hunting.

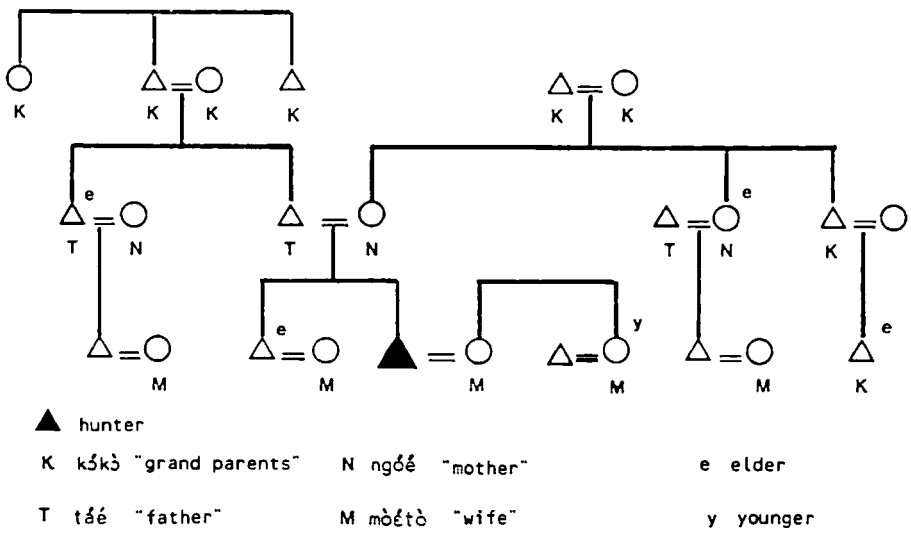

Fig. 4. Distribution of parts of meat.

piece of meat (i.e. flesh from a large game animal) is too small to be divided within either the task or the family group, the stew made from it is shared at this stage within the consumer group. This means that people outside the conjugal family eat at least some of the meat prepared, even though the final portions may be only a few grams. Sharing meatless stews, however, is optional and does not occur when quantities are small. For example, if there are only 100 grams of leaves for 5 or 250 grams of mushrooms for six persons, the family will keep what it has. Likewise, small birds or rodents, the intestines and heads of small mammals and limited quantities of caterpillars will not be distributed to other households. Preferential distribution can be observed and is justified on the pretext of small amounts. In this case, sharing may be limited to the closest relatives (e.g. brother, brother-in-law) and may exclude the households of more distant kin.

Figure 5 shows the extent of meal sharing in the different seasons when they employ different food-getting techniques, collective or non-collective. The number of dishes a household receives is much greater than the number of meals it prepares and distributes, ranging from four to ten portions received for every one shared out. As shown by the occurrence of unshared food, distribution within the camp is actually voluntary. The cook (woman) judges whether or not there is enough food to distribute outside her own household. I recorded at least one instance where distribution would have been possible (800 grams of caterpillar for three people), and another where it occurred quite unexpectedly (only 200 grams of duiker stomach for the whole camp). Partial distribution is also found: a single plate sent out of the house, usually to an elder, or a meal divided into only two or three households. The

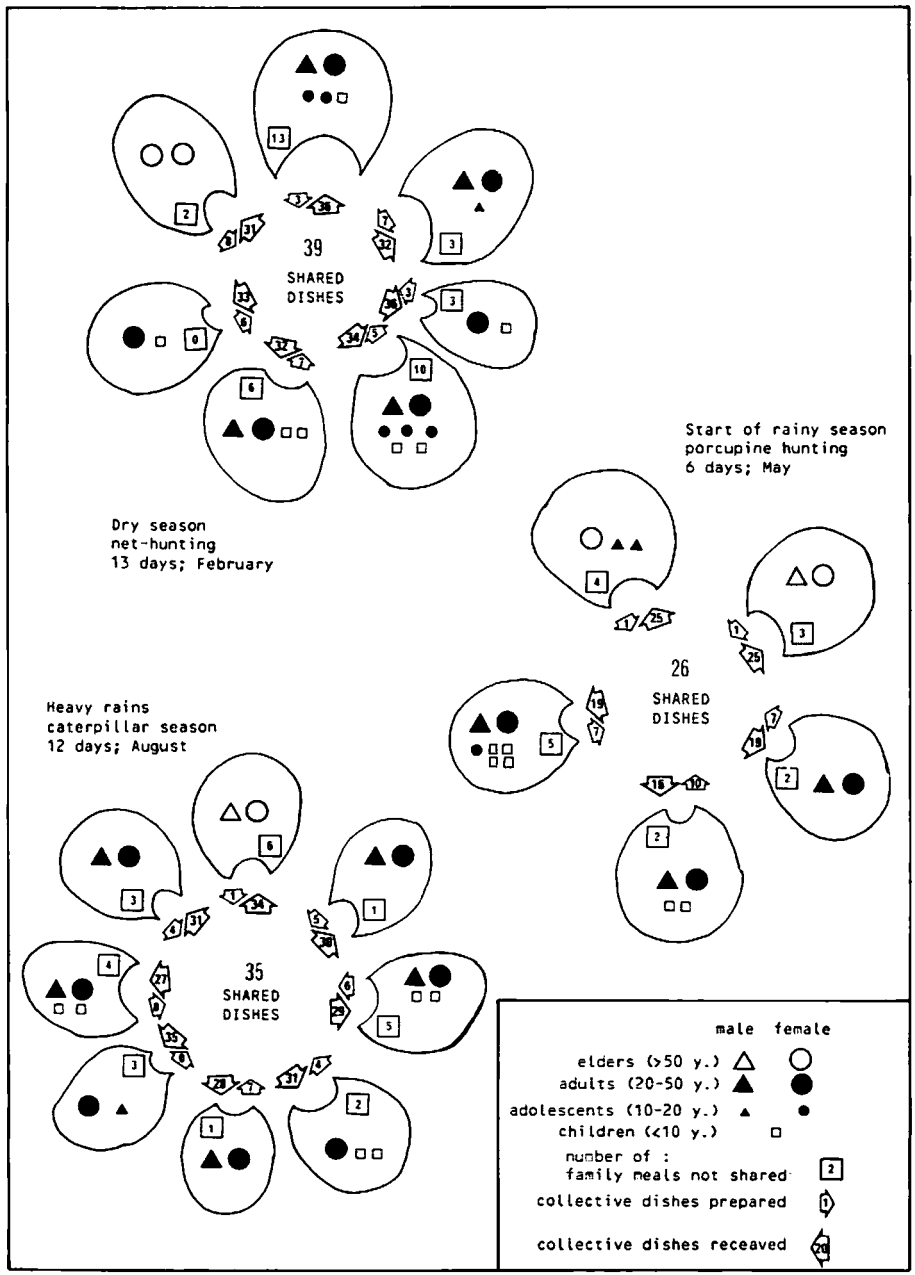

Fig. 5. Shared dishes in a camp.

family, therefore, chooses whether or not it shares its meals and with whom it shares. Temporary disappointment is evident when a household is left out of a distribution. It is this possibility of free choice that seems to us to prove the functional importance of food sharing.

IV. Sharing and Subsistence Effort

The 31 adults of a population of 72 account for 73% of the total work time, 9 adolescents for 19%, 5 old people for 8% and 27 children for 0% (Table 4). Only half the hunting attempts which take up 56% of the time spent working each year, are successful (Table 5). This means that for every two hunters who leave the camp. only one is likely to bring back game.

It thus becomes clear that adults supply most of the food for children and old people. The distribution of plates to other households in a camp assures that even the families of unlucky hunters have something to eat.

V. The Vocabulary of Sharing

The basic verb is "give" *kab-* which has two derivatives, an inversive *kaban-* "return" and a repetitive *kabany-* "share." "Share" is followed by "divide up, distribute" *nangam-: mo.so a kabanye bue, a nangama nde mo.nangame* "He who shares honey distributes it" (//the one/he/shares/honey//he distributes/thus/the distribution//).

"Serve" *teleng-* is distinct from "distribute" and has several derivatives: "circulate" *telengany-* and "serve around" *telengan-*: *ba telenga ma.leku* "they serve the drink." This term is used for all kinds of food, for meat as well as for drink, whereas a special verb designates the distribution of a liquid *konga-* "distribute (a liquid)," derived from *kong-* "pour (a liquid into a container)." The concept of sharing is also

Table 4. Subsistence effort (time devoted to food getting).

Age category	Number of individuals	Contribution (%)	
		Total	per person
Adolescents	9	19	26
Adult males	14	35	30
Adult females	17	38	27
Elders	5	8	17

Note: From a sample covering three 14-days periods (42-days or 1800 hours) in February, May and August 1976 for a population of 45 productive people (and 27 children).

Table 5. Hunting success.

Number of days	Number of hunts [A]	Number of successful hunts [B]	Success (%) [B/A]	Weight of game (kg) [C]	Weight consumed (kg) [D]	Consumed (%) [D/C]
18 (Jan.)	70	41	59	108	54	50
12 (May)	31	11	35	29	11	38
6 (June)	18	9	50	17	7	41
36 (Total)	119	61	51	154	72	47

conveyed by nouns: *di.salo za nyama* is the share of game (*nyama*) that has been butchered. Another term, *mo.bando* "due" (what is received in sharing) is used to designate the part attributed to someone: *kaba mo.bando-mu* "give me my due." Thus, a chain can be constructed in the following way:

The butchered game (*di.salo za nyama*) is shared (*kabany-*) among the hunters. They then distribute (*nangam-*) these parts (*mo.bando*) among their kin. The meat is cooked (*sip-* "cook") and then this food (*ndoko*) is served (*teleng-*) among those present in the camp. The symmetrical term for *kab-* "give" is *boas-* ("take, seize, grab"). The essential difference between these terms lies in the involvement of another person. You give something to someone else but you take something from some place (e.g. the ground).

While the above-mentioned vocabulary concerns food circulation within socio-economic units (i.e. camps), another series of words deals with exchange. The idea of value becomes evident: "exchange" *tek-* or *pu-* also means "sell"; *boka* refers to "value," "price" and by extension "credit" while *mbusa* means "debt," "arrears," (the first meaning being "back," "rear"). But the goods exchanged are *di.toli* "forged objects" (from *tol-* "forge") and *mbole* "trade products," all things coming from somewhere else. The opposite of "sell" (*tek-*) is "buy" (*sel-*).

We can therefore distinguish two different semantic fields, each one concerned with a distinct social sphere. The pair *di.salo/mo.bando* "portion"/"due" is in opposition to the pair *boka/mbusa* "value"/"debt." The first involves a gift (*kabany-* literally means "keep giving": *-any-* suffix indicating duration). The second concerns a calculated exchange. A third concept should be added to these two: the pair *kab-/kaban-* "give"/"give back" (*-an-* a suffix refering to reciprocity) indicates an uncalculated exchange.

VI. Sharing and Society

As we have seen, the process of food sharing, and especially meat sharing, goes through three phases: (1) dividing up meat among hunters, (2) sharing of each hunter's part among his kin, (3) distributing cooked food by each household. In each case, there is no immediate return and the quantity distributed is never measured. Reciprocity, if it does exist, occurs at some later date, depending on the outcome of other hunting expeditions. A hunter shares his portion with his kin according to genealogical ties and only gives to his elders. This means that the only reciprocity here is of a theoretical, differed kind, taking place when the hunter himself becomes an elder for his descendents.

The first two stages are cases of generalized reciprocity (Sahlins, 1972: 194) where "the material side of the transaction is repressed by the social." The counter-gift is implicit but the expectation of reciprocity is indefinite (the vague obligation to reciprocate when the giver is in need or the receiver is able to). This is what Price (1975) calls "sharing." The third stage is the only one where there is centralization: all the food obtained during the day by the active members of a conjugal family ends up in the hands of the woman, who then cooks it and divides it up. She is the one

who redistributes it. There is no other case of centralization among the Aka besides this last step in the chain of food processing. There is no leader in charge of sharing. This has already been mentioned in connection with game sharing, which is done at the end of the hunt by each *konza*. Since he is forbidden to eat this meat, it seems that his only role is to share the game according to the rules and not according to his own preferences. This food prohibition would appear to be a means of guaranteeing reciprocity in meat distribution, the distribution itself being guaranteed by the hunter's sense of "responsibility." Dowling (1968) has analysed this type of appropriation of game. It occurs prior to strict sharing of meat and confers the privilege of presiding over its distribution rather than the right of consuming it. Ingold (1980: 14) emphasizes that "the designation of 'ownership' in hunting societies, rather than establishing an exclusive claim on the product, effects an ideological separation between the categories of givers and receivers."

The concept of *konza* deserves to be better defined. This term designates the possessor of a tool, for example an ax or a spear. It also refers to the villager with whom an Aka has established a close economic relationship and is locally translated as "owner" but could equally well be "boss." Furthermore, it is used to name the leader of a ceremony or of a song *konza-lembo* "song leader," like *konza-langa* "camp leader" (synonym for *mbai* "elder"). This same term also characterizes the relationship between *be.dio* "spirits" and the forest. The spirits are said to be the *konza* "owners" of the forest. In the end the underlying concept conveyed by all these uses of the same term is more of responsibility than of possession. Even in the case of a weapon, it is its *konza*, and not the hunter who used it, who is forbidden to eat the animal it killed, the person "responsible" clearly being the owner of the object. Thus the notion of ownership among the Aka is quite different from ours, theirs being based on each individual's responsibility in assuring the prosperity of the community.

The obligation to share without return is a way of distributing losses and failures among a greater number of people. We can use the notion of risk as defined by Wiessner (1977: 5): the probability of an unfortunate occurence, i.e. "anything which can be detrimental to the survival and reproduction of an individual and his family." A way of reducing risks is pooling by means of creating social ties based on mutual obligation. This is a means of proportionately redistributing eventual occurences by increasing the possible number of cases and thus making the event more predictable. In addition to the obligation of sharing game, the duties of juniors to seniors are also mandatory.

Cooked or raw food is divided up only among the people present and there is no instance of portions being reserved for an individual who is not present. They are alloted to hunting functions (the fatal weapon is considered as an agent) and to people actually in the camp. No shares are saved for elders who are absent for a long time even though they are potentially entitled to them. This means that it is necessary and sufficient to join a group in order to participate in sharing, that is to obtain benefits. Membership is either direct (taking part in a hunt, even as a visitor) or indirect (lending an implement, net, spear, cross-bow or gun), and is acknowledged whether or

not one is present in the camp, (but it is better to be present to be sure to collect one's share of meat). By the mere physical presence in a camp, a visitor can receive food. If, moreover, he takes part in individual or collective food-getting activities, he also provides food for the camp. This reciprocity adds a time dimension to the gifts of food. To join a consumer group, that is, to obtain food as a gift, it is sufficient to be present for a very short term, but if one stays longer it is also necessary for him to participate in production activities. An elder who can no longer go hunting will lend his weapon to a younger man. This procedure has two advantages: first, it allows a younger person without his own weapon to provide meat for the group. Second, it allows an elder to participate in food-getting activities through an intermediary. By being the "acquirer" of the animal killed, he presides over sharing and in this way enters into the exchange network. This is an elegant way of receiving help without losing dignity since, according to the rules, the old man does not have the right to eat the meat.

OTHER AFRICAN PYGMIES

After describing how food sharing works among the Aka of the Central African Republic, I am now going to look at what we know about other Pygmy hunter-gatherers—the Mbuti of Zaïre, the Baka of eastern Cameroon and more briefly the Gyeli of south-western Cameroon.

I. Mbuti Net-Hunters

Available literature hardly gives a clear idea of food sharing among the Ituri Pygmies. Turnbull (1965: 158) remarks that "the system of sharing is nowhere the same... each band will state certain rules...." According to the same author, the aim of sharing after a hunt is to assure an equitable distribution, but special consideration is given to the net owner, to those who physically helped in the catch as well as to those who lent weapons. The most significant point Turnbull brings out is that when the meat is being divided, disputes, hostility and jealousy flair up. Quarrels were usually prompted by differences in the sharing protocols practised by neighbouring bands. Moreover, Turnbull indicates that 54% of the arguments he witnessed (i.e. more than a hundred) were about food. This subject gave rise to more disputes than did sexual affairs, conflicts with villagers or thefts (1965: 216).

More recently, the Japanese anthropologists Harako (1976), Tanno (1976) and Ichikawa (1983) have provided more detailed information. But not one of them discusses or clarifies the notorious inconsistency in sharing protocol found throughout the region. True, their data show differences in the details of game attribution, and all in all they confirm what Turnbull suggests. Game "belongs" to the owner of the net that immobilizes it or to the owner of the spear or arrow that first wounded the animal or to the owner of the dog that first bit it. It would appear that a second hunter is entitled to a preferential portion. If the hunting gear was borrowed, the rule

changes, thus emphasizing a difference in behavior. The lender of a spear only gets a haunch and the rest of the antelope goes to the hunter who killed it; the lender of a net is entitled to all the meat except one of the haunches, which goes to the borrower. Thus the animal is distributed according to the hunter's role during the hunt.

After the meat has been assigned in this manner to a specific person, a more general distribution done in "an informal way" (Ichikawa, 1983: 69) provides shares to all the families in the camp. In the case of net hunting, however, the man who built the ritual fire before the hunt receives the heads of all the antelope killed. Each hunter who has acquired game gives the women and children of his household the entrails, except for the liver and heart, which are reserved for elders (according to Harako) or adult men (according to Tanno). When the animals are butchered and distributed, special attention is paid to hunters who killed nothing. According to Harako (1976: 78) "though ownership of the game is formally expressed, the catch actually belongs to all the members of the camp."

Men and women are responsible for different aspects of meal preparation. The men gather around the central camp fire where they cook their own meat (the heads attributed to the fire master and the livers) and eat together. In front of their hut, each woman prepares her share of entrails and pieces of meat alloted to her household separately. When the meat, cooked with manioc, leaves, etc. is ready, she brings her husband a plateful, which he shares with his companions around the central fire. While the hunters are eating the food prepared by each others' wives, the women and children eat portions of entrails and some pieces of meat that have been sent around among the different huts (Fig. 6). This seems to indicate that men and women eat different unequivalent meals and that the circulation of cooked food is not generalized among the different huts within a camp. This would leave more room than does the Aka system, for individual choices in sharing, and the fact explains the great number of arguments over food.

Turnbull mentions that the Mbuti also share what they gather but he does not give any details. Honey, too, is shared, first at the foot of the tree among the collector and his associates, then in the camp. Ichikawa (1981) gives a precise description of honey-sharing, indicating that the honey belongs to the person who found the hive but that frequently he lets someone else, even a visitor, collect it. Gifts of honey, sometimes in large quantities, may be presented by one household to another, even to people who already have some (Fig. 7). In the light of this, Ichikawa (1981: 65) points out that here social factors are more important than nutritional ones and that "honey functions as the lubricant of the social relation," even more so since the honey season corresponds to the breaking down of large camps into smaller eventually composite units.

II. The Baka of Cameroon

Although a description of food sharing system is lacking, a lexical analysis based on a dictionary published by Brisson & Boursier (1979) of the Baka of eastern Cameroon, indicates nevertheless certain notions that can be compared with those of

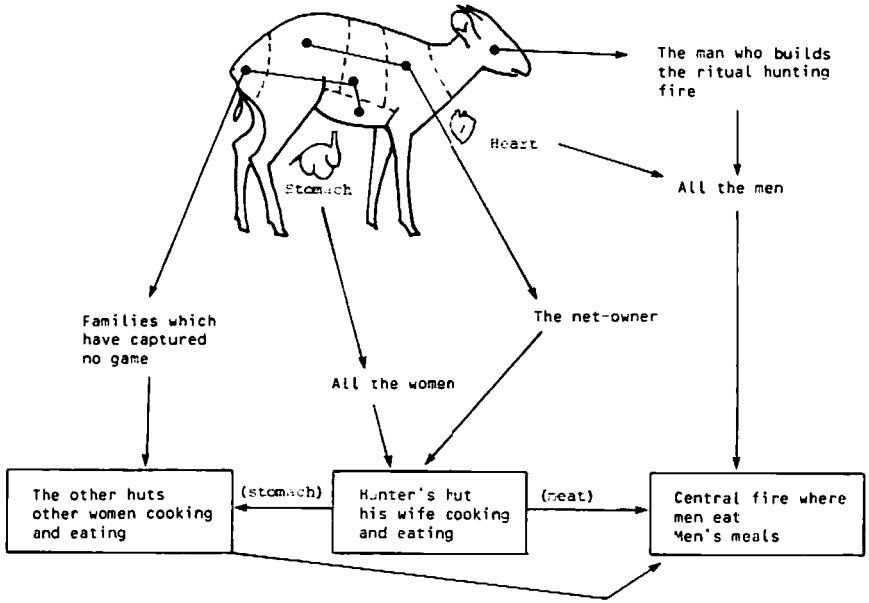

Fig. 6. Distribution of an animal among Mbuti net-hunters.

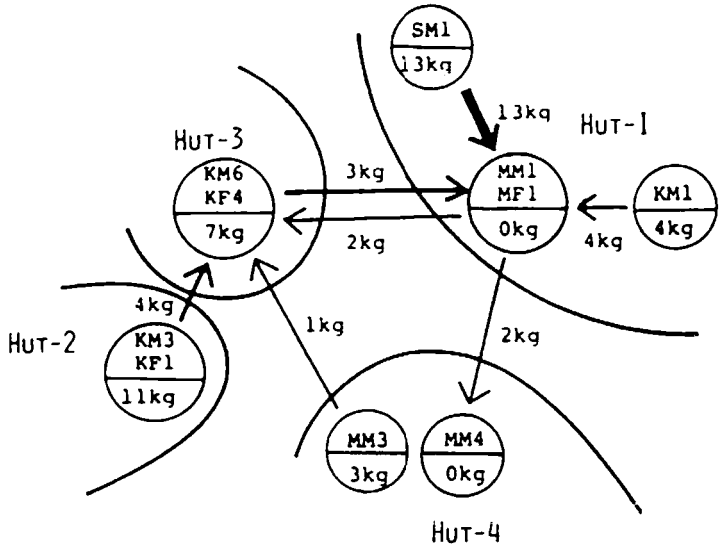

Fig. 7. Distribution of honey among Mbuti camp members on June 18, 1975. The figures in the circles show the amounts of honey possessed before the distribution (after Ichikawa, 1981).

the Aka.

The animal killed during a hunt is "cut up" (*sasoa*), and each hunter receives during "sharing" (*ka*) an "individual part" (*mobabo*) which is then "cut into small morsels" (*sekolo*). These "morsels of meat" (*ngbo*) are "distributed" (*gapa*). When a hunter who has killed a large animal returns, others can "ask for meat" (*libambi*). The offal, however, is put in a "package" (*ngili*) intended for several people. The gift of meat ("give" *to*) requires a return gift and creates a "debt" (*ekola*). These alloted portions are considered as "belongings" (*eluwa*). During a meal, one "takes" (*do*) the morsels by "pulling them off" (*panji*), but to take all "with greed" (*mbambaka*) not leaving anything for the others is an "offense" (*mimili*) just as reprehensible as eating "on the sly" (*kukumili*). In the same way, "refusing food" (*yo pe*) gives rise to "complaints" (*yote*) even "supplications" (*bibi*).

A penchant for meat ("meat hunger" *pene*) and a taste for honey ("desire for honey" *gomo poki*) can be compared with "lack" (*bosenga*) and "hunger" (*pote*). Balanced reciprocal exchange (*yanga* "exchange," "barter") is distinct from both "sharing" (*ka*) and "selling for money" (*bomo*). The owner of a tool, object, animal (dog) or house is also the master, responsible for it (*mo* or *momolo* "owner"; *mobala* "camp leader"). The hunter "asks" (*njonga*) the spirits for game in the same terms that one asks someone for food.

This vocabulary is by no means exhaustive and even though the terms are different in the two languages, notions already found among the Aka are evident here. First of all, an identical concept for owner implying both responsibility and possession. Next there is "meat hunger" (the same word *pene*); the opposition "share"/"exchange" and "sell"; the existence of a return gift for food ("give"/"give back" among the Aka and "give" and "debt" among the Baka). In this context and unless further ethnographic descriptions of sharing become available among the Baka which would show some difference, it would seem that the situation is the same in the two groups and that the idea of sharing is identical.

III. The Gyeli of South-Western Cameroon

We were able to conduct only a brief preliminary study in several Gyeli hunting camps in July 1984,[1] and practically nothing at all has been published on this group, which could enrich our own data. One point of interest, however, is that the Gyeli are deeply involved in a system of commercial meat production. This, linked to rudimentary agriculture, has clearly distinguished them from other Pygmies for a long time (Loung, 1959).

Sharing game conforms to a familiar plan: the animal being ascribed to the net owner. If the hunter who beats the animal into the net does not own one himself, the animal goes to him, and if a dog catches the animal, the meat goes to the master of the dog. In all instances, the second person to take hold of the animal is entitled to a part of the meat. A collective hunt is decided on and directed by a hunting leader, who is often but not always the camp leader. He receives the heads of all the antelope caught during the day. In the same manner, the hunter who directed the hunt

all day, both by singing and vocalizing and by reciting magical incantations, gets all the hearts. According to hunters from different regions, these two principal figures always receive designated parts but not necessarily the heads and the heart.

The hunter is the master of his meat and he gives portions to his parents, parents-in-law and brothers when they are present. The woman cooks the meal and takes a portion for herself, her children and other women belonging to the same household (co-wife, mother). Then she sends plates of food to her husband's father and brothers as well as to her own father, who all eat together in the center of the camp, each sharing his food with one another. Plates of food only travel one way and no return dishes are sent to women. Even if a family has no luck in hunting, the man can still eat meat during the men's collective meal, but not his wife, unless a close relative give her some.

COMPARISONS AND DISCUSSION

I. Similarity and Difference

Despite the uneven nature of the data, a comparison among these four African Pygmy groups can be attempted.

The first point, though evident, should nevertheless be emphasized: all four groups practice sharing, and they all distinguish three phases: sharing among hunters, sharing of his part by the hunter and distribution of cooked food. Likewise, they all share meat or other food without centralizing it, and this is done by ascribing the ownership of the animal to the owner of the weapon that killed it. Finally, food sharing is restricted to those present within the residential group; no food leaves the camp unless it is to be exchanged with villagers.

The way sharing is practiced, however, differs, perhaps not between the Aka and the Baka (but nothing is as yet clearly known) but definitely between the Aka, the Mbuti and the Gyeli. The first important difference is that only among the Aka is the hunter forbidden to eat the animal he has killed by himself. The second difference concerns the special part alloted by both the Mbuti and the Gyeli to net-hunting leaders (or master of the hunting fire, in the Mbuti case). As such a function does not exist among the Aka, there are no shares reserved for it. A third variation is found in the distribution of cooked dishes. Only the Aka circulate plates widely throughout the camp and they are the only group in which men and women eat together. Among the Mbuti and the Gyeli, men and women have different meals. The Mbuti practice only a limited distribution of cooked food (meat prepared by the women for the men, small portions of offal given by one woman to another), and therefore plates do not circulate within the camp. Irregularity is even greater among the Gyeli and clearly to the women's disadvantage.

Having so little ethnographic information available, it is difficult to interpret this patent inequality at all levels of sharing among the Gyeli. The most that can be done is to propose two hypotheses: first, this resembles that of the villagers to whom they

are historically and linguistically related (the Ngumba and Mabea), and it therefore must have evolved from theirs. Second, sharing has been so greatly influenced by meat trading monetarization, deep-seated "privatization" and a real individual appropriation of game and of the income from its sale ("Money helps to depersonalize and concretize the ownership and movement of wealth" according to Price, 1975: 8) that hunters are averse to sharing their earnings. During our study, several old Gyeli men observed that "now the young men do not share anymore."

A similar process has been detected among the Mbuti who, despite their reluctance, are finding themselves more and more involved in meat trading (Hart, 1978). Anthropologists have observed that the introduction of money (and credit) discourages sharing because it enables the Pygmies to obtain food elsewhere and by means other than those internal to the group. "Meat trading has thus accelerated the individualization of the band members" (Ichikawa, 1983: 72; for a broader look at social changes, see Turnbull, 1983).

To sum up, sharing satisfies two complementary functions, using different means: a supplying function and a social function. The former corresponding to food supply uncertainty, the later to group cooperation and cohesion.

II. The Supplying Function: Sharing and Food Supply Uncertainty

This function is obvious: sharing game is obligatory and governed by very precise, explicit rules. If these are not scrupulously followed, conflicts result. These rules vary according to how much hunters cooperate when capturing game (e.g. the Aka). This fact emphasizes both the real uncertainty of captures (we shall come back to this later) and also the great value attributed to the meat in food preferences ("meat hunger" among the Aka and the Baka).

The means used to assure food for community members vary in the different groups but have the same goal and similar results: among the Aka, the circulation of plates, sometimes preceded by a portion of game destined to the whole camp (e.g. spear hunting of large mammals); among the Mbuti, the parts reserved for the unlucky households (in net hunting), the collective meal shared by the men and the limited circulation of plates among the women. Data concerning the Baka are lacking but at least the existence of various terms for "demanding" or "refusing" food indicates not only eventual irregularities in food supply but also envy of what others possess.

This food supply uncertainty has already been studied (Bahuchet, 1988). It arises, on the one hand, from ecological variations in resources and on the other, from the unpredictable results of food-getting activities, especially of hunting. Plant and animal (insect) resources vary seasonally and moreover are unevenly distributed throughout the region (Bahuchet, 1978). The richness of the forest environment is biologically true (a very great number of living species) but is quite relative as far as food is concerned. Consequently, acquiring food necessitates suitable and complex techniques. The strategies developped by the Aka seek to reduce uncertainty by increasing the chances that food will be found. This can be accomplished by group

members' cooperating to prospect extended foraging areas, by increasing harvests and widening the range of acceptable food items, by reinforcing group hunting capacity (e.g. the chances of encountering game can be increased by multiplying expeditions and varying techniques). Despite all this, hunting is only 50% successful and the variation in quantity and quality of meat throughout the year shows that food supply is not regular and constant on a daily basis.

Ichikawa (1983) shows that among the Mbuti, hunting itself does not favor all the participants equally. In beating, the position of the nets is the success factor: of the ten nets used, the four placed opposite the beating line catch 52% of the prey. Even if hunters take turns occupying different positions, catches vary greatly for each participant. During a month of hunting, total catches varied from one to six (individual minimum of 24 kg, maximum 143 kg). "As far as individual hunters are concerned net hunting is neither a stable nor reliable method of procuring meat" (Ichikawa, 1983: 68).

These observations illustrate how important sharing is in redistributing food among households, who must eat every day. In addition to these results, it must not be forgotten that in each camp there are a number of people, young and old , who do not physically take part in food-getting activities.

III. The Social Function: Why Sharing?

The social function of sharing becomes evident at other levels of observation. One of the most important examples is honey sharing among the Mbuti. Here large quantities of honey are given to every one, even if they already have some, in a seemingly circular manner. When the distribution is over, everyone has roughly the same amount as he did before, but someone else has given it to him (see Table 6 in Ichikawa, 1981: 65). Another interesting point is that circulation of plates among the Aka is left to the discretion of each wife-cook. Beyond the level that sharing ring is obligatory and strictly controlled, people are free to distribute as they wish, among the Mbuti (Harako, 1976) as among the Aka. Terms designate "greed" and "miser," i.e. one who keeps what he has for himself (baka: *njo*; aka: *veyenge*), or on the contrary someone who is generous is described as "good, courageous and kind" (baka: *joko*; aka: *nyongo*). Among the Baka the social aspect is also brought out by pejorative words for "greed" (taking more than others), "eating on the sly" (which implies refusing to share), "taking for oneself," "stealing by cheating": all are "wrong." The notions of debt, expected return, due, are also present, and people know "how to remind of a promise" (aka: *yangis-*). A final element emphasizing the social function is the explicit distinction made by both the Aka and the Baka between sharing, where reciprocity is deferred, and trading, where it is more or less immediate. In addition to this, it should be noted that for the Aka, food distribution is just one aspect of a larger exchange network that comprises tools (especially iron ones). The Pygmies get iron from the farmers (along with cultivated food) in exchange for meat. This iron is not only necessary for hunting but also enters into marriage payments.

Furthermore, Aka domestic life is concretized by the life of the married couple.

The efficacity of food supply depends on the couple which in turn relies on hunting success to assure its stability. Marriage also permits alliances that make cooperation in collective hunts possible. Moreover, at the ritual, cosmological and symbolic levels, hunting, fecundity and sexuality are linked and interdependent. The prosperity and well-being of the camp are related to successful hunting and numerous descendants. The interdependence and other elements of the system can be illustrated by the triangle as shown in Figure 8. Food sharing cannot, therefore, be isolated from other exchanges in this society. In fact, for the Aka, the richness of their natural environment is not sufficient to assure social life, as this is not based on food, alone. Food sharing is a factor, a function in the wider system of exchange and cooperation that perpetuates the society.

Let us examine this point more carefully. Among the Aka, the production is linked to the existence, on one hand, of the couple (minimal production unit, using tools), and on the other of a residential group made of a number of couples (the social means of gaining access to resources). The core of a group is based on patrilineal kinship but an important number of the couples are only distantly or indirectly related. In this sense, kinship is not the principal factor in residential group formation. We have already mentioned how fluctuating camp composition can be. Production techniques are mostly collective and therefore require the association of couples (both as couples and as individuals). The reproduction of the society requires the formation of new couples and therefore alliances with other new families. Finally, tools are derived from another economic system, foreign to the Aka, and obtained by sending food (Fig. 9).

This system of necessities brings us close to the system of three "constraints" that Godelier (1977) developped from analyzing the material Turnbull published on the Mbuti net-hunters. These "constraints" reflect the social conditions of the reproduction of this mode of production and express the limits of the possibilities of this reproduction. They are first of all the "dispersion of hunting groups and minimal and maximal limits to their size"; next, "cooperation" of individuals according to their age and sex in the production process and net hunting," and thirdly "the fluidity, openness and maintenance of a state of permanent flux among bands illustrated by rapid and frequent variations in their size and social composition" (Godelier, 1977: 118–119).

An analysis conducted in a population where net hunting is not the sole or even principal production process, as it is for the Epulu band described by Turnbull,

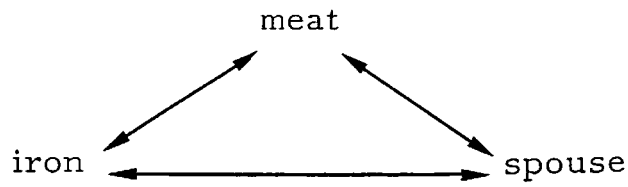

Fig. 8. Exchange system of the Aka.

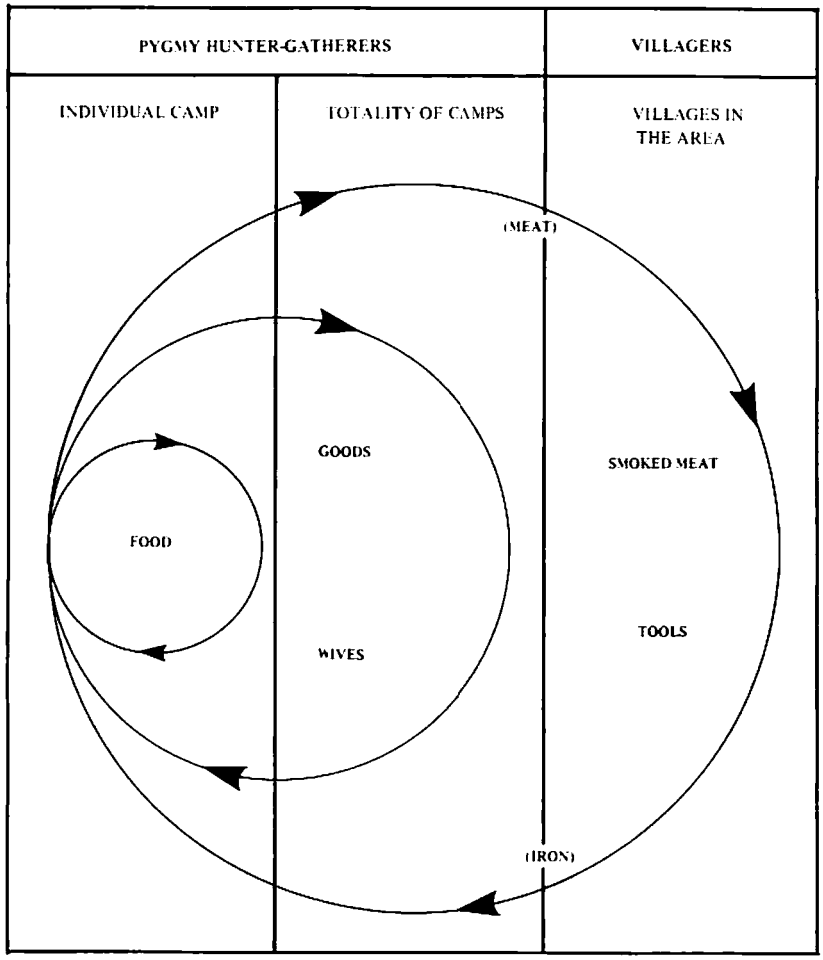

Fig. 9. Exchange system of the Aka Pygmies.

would perhaps differ slightly, but it is nonetheless striking that these three traits (group dispersal, cooperation among individuals and open band structure) exist in other Pygmy groups (Ituri Efe archers, and Aka in Central African Republic). Without analysing this theory or proposing another model based on other Pygmy groups, let us only examine the place that sharing occupies in Godelier's system.

Sharing certainly is one of the elements of relations of production (circulation and redistribution of the fruits of labor) and as such, it is one of the consequences of the second constraint, that of cooperation [". . .dans le procès de production et dans le procès de répartition des produits de chasse et de cueillette" (Godelier, 1977: 119)].[3] Nevertheless, one can also see in it an institution that is one of the conditions for this cooperation, this association grouping together otherwise relatively

mobile individuals. The institution of generalized sharing, both as consequence and condition, bridges the gap between individuals and unites them in a community.

As we pointed out in the introduction, sharing, a means of collective appropriation is at the pivot of hunter-gatherer societies. This social solution could be qualified as "keeping potential cooperation in reserve" while other economic systems have opted for other solutions to the problem of food supply (e.g. storing, cf. Testard, 1982a). I hope to have shown here how sharing, general among hunter-gatherers, becomes specific in particular societies, in those of Pygmy groups living in the Central African forest.

NOTES

(1) Studies among Aka Pygmies in Central African Republic were conducted from 1972 to 1980 during several field stays of various length (2 to 18 months), with grant of Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle (Laboratoire d'Ethnobotanique) and C.N.R.S. (ERA 773, ER 263 and LACITO). Field survey of Gyeli in southwestern Cameroon was done as part of a Franco-Cameroonian multi-disciplinary project of anthropology of food, directed by Professors de Garine (CNRS, Paris) and Loung (Institut des Sciences Humaines, Yaoundé).

(2) Aka is a Bantu language: I am using here for notation the phonetic alphabet of the I.A.I. A tiret after the verbs indicates words given at their radical form (without conjugation). See Appendices 1 and 2 for the Aka and Baka vocabulary.

(3) Approximative translation: "in the production process and in the process of distributing what has been obtained through hunting and gathering."

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Appendix 1

BAKA VOCABULARY

bibi	bǐbǐ	mobabo	mɔ̀bābɔ̀
bomo	bɔ̄mɔ̀	momolo	mɔ̀mɔ́lɔ́
bosenga	bɔ̀sɛ̀ngà	ngbo	ngbɔ̄
do	dɔ̄	ngili	ngǐlǐ
ekola	ɛ̀kɔ̀lā	njo	njɔ̄
eluwa	ɛ̀lùwà	njonga	njɔ̄ngà
gapa	gāpà	panji	pánjí
gomo poki	gōmɔ̀ pɔ̀kǐ	pene	pɛ̄nɛ̄
joko	jɔ́kɔ̀	pote	pɔ̀tɛ̄
ka	kà	sasoa	sāsɔ̀à
kukumili	kúkūmìlī	sekolo	sɛ̄kɔ̀lɔ̀
libambi	lǐbāmbī	to	tɔ̄
mbambaka	mbāmbàkà	yanga	yāngà
mimili	mīmīlǐ	yo pe	yɔ̄.pɛ̄
mo	mɔ́	yote	yɔ̄tɛ̄
mo-bala	mɔ́-bālā		

Appendix 2

AKA VOCABULARY			
-an-	-ăn-	mbai	mbàì
-any-	-ăɲ-	mbusa	mbúsà
ba telenga ma.leku		mo.so a kabanye bue,	
bâ téléngá mà.lèkù		a nangama nde mo.nangame :	
be.dio	bè.díò	mò.só â kàbàɲè búê,	
boas-	bòàs-	â nángámá ndé mò.nángámé	
di.salo	dì.sálò	moeto	mòɛtò
di.salo za nyama		ndoko	ndɔkɔ́
dì.sálò zá ɲàmà		ngoe	ngóé
di.toli	dì.tòlì	nyama	ɲàmà
e.mbole	è.mbólé	nyongo	ɲɔngɔ̀
kab-	kàb-	pu-	pú-
kaba mo.bando-mu		sel-	sél-
kàbá mò.bàndó-mù		sip-	sìp-
kaban-	kàbăn-	tae	táé
kabany-	kàbăɲ-	tek-	tɛ́k-
koko	kɔ́kɔ̀	teleng-	télĕng-
kong-	kɔ̀ng-	telengan-	télĕngăn-
konga-	kɔ̀ngă-	telengany-	télĕngăɲ-
konza	kònzà	tol-	tòl-
konza-lango	kònzà-lángɔ̀	veyenge	vɛyéngé
konza-lembo	kònzà-lémbò	yangis-	yàngĭs-